

By **Christian Gysin**

A GROUP of squatters who broke into a £9million house have been told they can stay there rent free.

They have struck a deal with the housing association which owns the 15-bedroom property.

The group of around 20 broke in three months ago and plan to remain for at least six months more at the Victorian house in Hampstead, North London. Such a house would normally fetch up to £8,000 a week in rent, estate agents said yesterday.

The squatters, who call themselves The Collective, wrote to the housing association in an attempt to strike a deal shortly after breaking in. A few weeks later, Circle 33 Housing Association - which bought the house for £8,770,000 in June last year - agreed the squatters could stay in return for ensuring its security and upkeep.

A spokesman for the squatters - who prefer to call themselves 'environmental caretakers' - said yesterday that they were delighted with the outcome of their negotiations.

When the house is redeveloped they hope to move on to another of the capital's empty homes. The group marked their arrival in Hampstead by introducing themselves to their neighbours through leaflets.

They not only gave their telephone numbers out, but in some cases lectured the neighbours on environmental issues.

'It was strange when they first arrived,' said one neighbour last night. 'They were talking about the environment all the time. Another simply extolled the virtues of organic food. But they have been no trouble.'

Yesterday, a local estate agent estimated that the property in Fitzjohn's Avenue would normally command rents of between £4,500-£8,000 a week.

Ali Nathan, lettings manager at Hamptons International in Hampstead, added: 'We have never known a

Squatters given £9m mansion



Rambling: The 15-bedroom house in Hampstead

including one young child, with the group including Britons, French, Australians and Poles.

The Hampstead squatters have been better received than a group who took over a £10million property in nearby Primrose Hill last month. They were evicted

after hosting 24-hour drink and drug parties which attracted hundreds of teenagers. Last night, the Circle 33 Housing Association defended the decision to allow the squatters to remain. 'They approached our organisation requesting they be

allowed to remain, and after full consultation with immediate neighbours we employed solicitors to prepare a licence to occupy,' said a spokesman. 'There has been no feedback from neighbours to suggest any anti-social behaviour.'

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